

Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

Volume 5

Article 2

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Kaplin, David (2013) "Maximizing Short-Term Study Abroad Programs Offered by State Comprehensive Universities," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 5 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol5/iss1/2>

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Maximizing Short-Term Study Abroad Programs Offered by State Comprehensive Universities

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Study abroad experiences offer a wide range of growth opportunities to participating students. From heightened independence and personal confidence to an enhanced understanding of the host culture to a greater awareness of cross-cultural and global citizenship, the benefits of well-run study abroad programs have been assessed through survey questions, interviews, faculty observations, and student testimonials (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis, 2012; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Gorka & Niesenbaum, 2001). In addition, students returning from study abroad programs tend to rethink the goals of their undergraduate education, often taking more interdisciplinary courses and courses involving cross-cultural components, and many travel or plan to travel internationally again (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Their home campuses benefit, too, from students sharing their global engagement through civic commitment, extra- and co-curricular activities, motivation for cross-cultural study, and heightened cultural awareness in discussions both in and outside the classroom. At four-year colleges and universities, these programs enjoy continuing popularity: according to the most recent *Open Doors* report (Institute of International Education, 2012), nearly 234,000, or 13.8%, of US students earning bachelor's degrees traveled abroad during the 2010-2011 school year. By contrast, that number represents only 1.4% of students enrolled in any type of higher education program, suggesting a correlation between students seeking bachelor's degrees and students seeking the personal and pre-professional benefits of study abroad programs (Institute of International Education, 2012).

For many students at state comprehensive universities (SCUs), however, full-year or semester abroad programs may not seem feasible. SCUs offer some of the most affordable quality higher education in the country, but many students have to plan carefully, find part-time work, and make sacrifices in order to take advantage of the value provided by SCUs. Study abroad programs can therefore become cost prohibitive, especially when, as at most SCUs, financial aid packages are calculated based on local costs and may not be transferrable to programs run outside the state system. Navigating extensive general education and major program requirements at SCUs also poses a challenge for students thinking about an entire semester abroad; transfer students, who make up a notable portion of the student body at many SCUs, often find it especially difficult to work a semester abroad into their plans to complete a bachelor's degree in four years because some of their general education and major courses may not be recognized as equivalents by their new

institutions. Moreover, first-time international travelers may also be anxious about spending four months to a year away from their families and their jobs. Short-term study abroad programs provide an attractive alternative to semester and year-long experiences, especially for students concerned about costs and time away from home. Short-term programs can vary from a single week, often during winter or spring break, to summer courses and longer programs of two to eight weeks, and often include travel to multiple sites and research projects in and about the host culture. Programs lasting eight weeks or less have soared in popularity, accounting for 58% of student study abroad experiences in 2010-2011, whereas fifteen years ago, only 3.3% of students studying abroad participated in short-term programs (Institute of International Education, 2012; Donnelly-Smith, 2009, p. 12).

However, short-term study abroad programs present unique challenges to their organizers generally and to SCU faculty and study abroad offices in particular; a well-run short-term program needs to consider a host of strategies in order to anticipate common difficulties and maximize students' international engagement. Drawing from current research and my own experiences as a faculty program leader of the summer Literary London program at the State University of New York at Fredonia, I explain here some of the most frequently encountered challenges and offer some specific methods for meeting them that can be adapted by organizers offering short-term programs at other SCUs. The more we share our experiences and specific program successes (and difficulties), the stronger our short-term programs can become, and the more our students can enrich their own lives and their campus communities back home.

Established in 2006 and directed each year by my colleague, Dr. Adrienne McCormick, our Literary London program offers undergraduate students and Master's candidates six credit hours through two courses that meet daily during a summer fortnight in London. Each course meets for two hours every morning and is followed by an afternoon excursion that ties directly to the reading assignments and discussions in one course (and often in both courses). The program builds in two free days, usually the middle Sunday and the last Saturday before our return, for students to plan and explore on their own. While course content varies with the faculty members participating in the program each year, all program courses are designed to emphasize the unique opportunity of on-site learning in ways that connect student experiences to their coursework and learning communities back home. Beginning with six students in its inaugural year, the program has grown to accommodate eighteen or more participants in recent years, and this success has allowed us to fund a returning graduate student as a program coordinator who provides indispensable research, administrative assistance, and mentoring help to students before, during, and after our time in London. Over the years, we have honed several features of the program to address concerns that accompany short-term study abroad and to promote the principal goals of international education opportunities.

While there is a growing body of research and reporting about longer study abroad programs, there is surprisingly little research on the more recent explosion of short-term experiences. A few program organizers have compiled brief lists of “best practices” for planning and running short-term programs, and these guidelines provide a strong point of departure for continued discussion and elaboration of options for maximizing student experiences. Donnelly-Smith (2009) proposes five best practices for short-term programs, namely: (1) strong academic content; (2) experiential teaching methods; (3) integration with the local host community; (4) inclusion of lecturers from the host culture; and (5) ongoing individual and group reflection. Lewis & Nielsenbaum (2005) stress community-based research and service learning opportunities in the host country and developing links between these projects and students’ coursework in their home institutions. Any of these components promises to enhance students’ experiences abroad. In this paper, I would like to highlight those that I have found most successful and easy to implement and propose additional practices to add to this growing list, using examples from my experience as a program leader and student feedback from our short-term summer program.

Pre-Departure Expectations, Assignments, and Meetings

The central concern most educators (and many parents) share about short-term study abroad programs is that students may view them more as extended vacations than as the rich and demanding educational opportunities they can be. Framing the program as an investigation of cultural connections channels the excitement students feel in visiting another country and focuses expectations beyond myopic tourist attractions. From the beginning, therefore, it is important to advertise the experience as a course or a program rather than a “tour” or a “trip,” and to emphasize the anticipated learning outcomes in promotional materials. Communication with participants in the weeks leading up to departure is also an integral part of framing students’ expectations and inquiries. As Robert Gordon (2010) recently demonstrated in *Going Abroad: Traveling Like an Anthropologist*, study abroad programs run the risk of exacerbating rather than debunking negative stereotypes of the host culture (and, conversely, of host citizens’ views of American students). Student journals, Gordon observed, often focus more on what the students learn about themselves than on what they learn about their host cultures. While self-reflection remains one of the primary goals of study abroad, the danger that students might seek evidence to confirm rather than challenge preconceived notions of a host culture suggests that pre-departure discussions with participants is important to encourage more outward-looking analysis and reflection.

Pre-departure discussions can reveal the power of mainstream media images to shape our “understanding” of other cultures and uncover for analysis our assumptions about American culture. Sarah Jewett (2010) explains how the images of Irish culture her students brought to a study abroad program there were influenced by “a collage of corporate-sponsored imagery” like “Kiss Me,

I'm Irish" T-shirts, and beer commercials, and even episodes of *Family Guy* (p. 641). By discussing these images as marketing agents trying to sell not only a product but a reductionist image of ethnicity, Jewett argues, students were able to shake the foundations of these and associated stereotypes and look for more complex cultural signifiers. In addition, by calling out commercially constructed images of a host culture, students can re-examine assumptions about American identities, including why advertisers believe that *their* images of the host culture will be appealing to American consumers. Perhaps most importantly, exploring cultural expectations pre-departure can help students realize that culture, like individual identity, is constructed, and the process by which they assemble their own understandings of a host culture is as important to their study abroad as are the observations they make about what and whom they encounter.

For Literary London, we have developed a blog that provides a platform for students to share their excitement, anxieties, and preconceived ideas of what London and its inhabitants might be like, and for program leaders to post links to historical and cultural analyses of English culture (including contemporary BBC News broadcasts). Program leaders pose questions about cultural expectations to generate or direct part of this conversation, and the blog format provides a continuous conversation during the few months between the time students sign up for the program and our early-summer departure in which to gradually tease out the issues associated with constructing cultural identities. The blog also offers participants from other campuses and colleges the chance to introduce themselves and participate in this dialogue. Here, program leaders post course syllabi and introduce readings that must be completed before the students depart for London. For example, before their departure, students must complete *Bleak House* and a biography of Dickens for my course, Dickens and His City, as well as at least five of the seven shorter novels for my colleague's course, Women Writing London. Reading guides and discussion questions encourage students to see their university courses as the centerpiece of their adventure abroad rather than as secondary obligations to justify a summer trip. Beginning pre-departure conversations early also allows program leaders to address practical questions like what to pack and how much spending money to bring without letting these issues define the preparation students should be doing before they leave the States; the ongoing discussions of readings, stereotypes, and cultural identity become their true preparatory work. Program leaders meet with local students at the end of the spring semester to reinforce the discussion and augment shared excitement for the adventure, and this meeting usually results in increased blog activity and momentum that carries through to the date of departure.

Establishing Neighborhood Interaction

Real estate is not the only field in which the defining feature is location, location, location. Where students live during their short-term programs can

dramatically decrease what Sarah Spencer of the University of St. Thomas calls the “island” or “bubble” effect (Donnelly-Smith, 2009, p. 15). Students traveling as a group in chartered coaches tend to bounce like a collective bubble from attraction to attraction, and if their evenings are spent in generic hotel rooms, especially in hectic and impersonal city centers, they may never emerge from that bubble and engage with the host culture in meaningful ways. Home-stays can maximize interpersonal interaction and ideally form lasting friendships and opportunities for future exchanges, but these arrangements can be both expensive and time consuming to vet, organize, and supervise. One alternative we have adopted is to stay in the dorms of University College London. The campus facilities are already set up for student life (including reception and security personnel) and provide inexpensive and reliable breakfasts and dinners whose costs are built into the program fees. Dorm living further underscores the academic focus of the program, and even while English university students do not take summer courses, the dorms house students on similar programs from a number of countries, providing opportunities for both sharing experiences and comparing cultural expectations and constructions-in-progress.

The University College dorms are located in the heart of Bloomsbury, a relatively quiet area of the city, which provides students the opportunity to explore a safe but lively neighborhood. After dinner at the dorms, many of our students investigated the area’s shops, parks, coffeehouses, and pubs, and reported in program evaluations that “people watching” and starting conversations with locals whom they saw regularly made them feel at home in this neighborhood. Students also wrote that a familiar corner of the city made greater London feel more “manageable” and “relatable.” Ideally, contact and conversation with host citizens should extend beyond typical coffeehouse or tavern exchanges. Still, several students reported being surprised by the currency and depth with which many of their English contemporaries discussed American economics, social policies, literature and art, and other topics. And, many of them said that their most memorable and meaningful conversations occurred with people of their own age that they met at these neighborhood venues, sometimes repeatedly. This manageable home-base environment has helped each group of our students temporarily escape the bubble effect and connect with part of the host culture.

Excursions: Beyond Tourism

Organized coach rides and group excursions are an unavoidable part of many short-term study abroad programs, including Literary London. We have traveled by coach to Avebury and Stonehenge for the summer solstice and to Virginia Woolf’s home at Monk’s House outside of Lewes, and we have all herded onto the same train for day-long expeditions to Oxford. During these more claustrophobic bubble journeys, it is important to find and work with guides who are willing to interact with students on an individual or small group basis, not only in question-and-answer periods but also sharing

anecdotes and listening to students' experiences and expectations. Developing relationships with cultural experts and guides takes time and depends to a large extent on program leaders' research and partnerships: meeting before the excursions and maintaining contact from program year to program year are two ways in which we have been able to facilitate our experts' flexibility in working with our unique cohort, rather than depending solely and passively on pre-packaged presentations.

When we are not traveling of necessity en masse, program leaders encourage students to find their own ways to the daily afternoon excursions in different parts of the city. Armed with tube and bus maps, unlimited travel cards, and general directions and estimated times for reaching each day's destination, students themselves have to negotiate urban travel with the added pressure of grading penalties for arriving late to any of our destinations. Although this challenge may appear to offer relatively insignificant opportunities for cultural interaction, placing the responsibility for intra-city navigation onto the students demands heightened and continuous observation and alertness on their part. From the conversations I had with our participants, for example, the difference in the level of details about what students remember from a tube ride when they are following a leader and when they have to plan and execute their own route is astounding: during the latter, students recalled not only more geographic and sign cues but also details of fellow passengers and their conversations, and even the layouts of particular stations. In addition, as they began to understand the spatial relations of city, students demonstrated increased confidence and willingness to explore more diverse areas on their own time. The program's courses, which rely heavily on the historical and contemporary geography of London, reinforce this confidence and provide memorable contexts to which students can relate the intra-city journeys they take each day.

Tying the excursions to course readings may be the single most important element in maintaining a program's emphasis on thoughtful and purposeful cultural investigation over fleeting tourism. Course connections establish a frame of reference for approaching landmarks or institutions, as when students tour Highgate Cemetery after reading Tracy Chevalier's *Fallen Angels*, or learn about the history of the Victoria & Albert Museum while examining Dickens's original manuscripts of *Bleak House*, or compare visions of the Thames in Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* with those in Penelope Lively's *City of Mind* during an afternoon in the Museum of the Docklands. Literary context provides immediate relevance to each location, but the repeated pattern of framing excursions through coursework asks students to enact a model of analytical site appreciation beyond guidebook descriptions and tourists' snapshots. Even though the program is short, the daily repetition of this model of constructing ideological, aesthetic, social, and historical significance at every location can lead to more analytical approaches to students' future travel, whether it is worldwide or within their home counties and states.

Local Civic Engagement

Study abroad directors stress that students who participate in civic responsibilities in their host countries generally emerge from their study abroad programs with more profound and lasting understandings of both their host cultures and their roles as global citizens (Lewin, 2009; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Annette, 2002). Some short-term programs are dedicated to volunteer programs or charitable organizations (DiSpigno, 2001), but few sources offer specific examples of civic engagement in short-term programs where community or volunteer work is not the principal feature of the stay. Indeed, how can leaders of a study abroad program incorporate civic interaction within a two-week stay that is already packed with coursework and related excursions?

Two strategies have proven successful in building civic engagement into Literary London: (1) remaining as flexible as possible in scheduling and (2) researching local festivals and neighborhood events. The former may sound like an easy strategy to effect, but in reality, remaining open to schedule changes has been far more challenging than the research necessary to find local civic opportunities. The more personalized an excursion becomes—requesting and briefing particular guides, organizing uniquely appropriate private museum showings, negotiating times for group visits to ordinarily non-public spaces—the further in advance these excursions are booked, and the less likely they are to be moved on short notice. I have found, however, that even the most formal institutions in London are eager to accommodate student groups that articulate a specific, mature interest in what they have to offer; phone and even Skype conversations with curators, field experts, and building managers during the planning stages of the program have allowed me later to plead successfully for last-minute changes in plans because our program seems unique, serious, and memorable to them.

The most illustrative cases from last summer's program also highlight the other strategy for civic engagement, researching local events. Summer 2012 was a busy time in London: Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee in early June was followed by the public celebration of her 86th birthday, all amid hectic preparations for the summer Olympics in late August. Plus, the year marked Dickens's bicentennial. We knew from the beginning that this year would be difficult to schedule. The University College dorms were already booked from midsummer by families of Olympic athletes, so we were forced to set the program dates weeks before our usual fortnight, cutting into the time for students to complete pre-departure assignments and for us to initiate pre-departure conversations. Some of our contacts from previous years were unavailable during this time, and major Dickens exhibits were closing before or upon our arrival in order to make room for Jubilee and Olympic displays. Nevertheless, we managed to schedule and tailor excursions before our spring semester ended and well before our June 8 departure. But then, our program coordinator uncovered a celebration of civic pride that we had to include. The University College was itself inaugurating an annual "One Day in the City" festival in which authors, historians, architects, filmmakers, and a wide variety of other academics and

professionals presented lectures, roundtable discussions, demonstrations, and readings throughout the first Friday of our stay. The event's civic mission was as clear as it was appropriate for our program: "For one day we aim to create intimate and dynamic forums through which the city, research on the city, and creative talents within the city can be celebrated and showcased to as wide an audience as possible" (University College London, 2012). Such a celebration of contemporary London fit well with our course materials, in which the history, character, and vital force of the city feature prominently.

To make this opportunity available to our students, we had to shorten and reschedule our morning classes and reschedule an excursion to a small museum for which special arrangements had been made to accommodate our specific group, which in turn required other excursions to be shifted. For the festival, students selected a minimum of two events during the day and were also required to attend one of the two keynote events in the evening. The payoff was immediate and dynamic: after the first group of panels, I found students energetically sharing experiences with one another, plotting together about which other events to attend, and engaging in lively conversations with English university students who had also come for the festival. Individual presentations connected masterfully with our coursework (for example, William Raban's screening and discussion of his short film, *The Houseless Shadow*, which resituated Dickens's essay "Night Walks" in the streets of contemporary London, elaborated and brought to life just the connections my course hoped to develop between Dickens's London and what students experienced in 2012), but more generally, the emphasis on civic and cultural pride that defined the whole day gave students a chance to participate in an important moment of community building and self-definition.

Another frequent opportunity for student civic engagement can be found in neighborhood fêtes and even block parties, some of which can be scouted in advance while others require local research after the group's arrival. Last year, midway through our program, we learned that the nearby area of Greenwich was reinstating its annual Fair after sixty years. The Fair, of which Dickens writes sardonically in one of his *Sketches by Boz*, was suspended after it got to be too bawdy and even licentious, but Greenwich decided to reinvent the affair as a family-friendly celebration of art, culture, and civic pride. At this point in the program, students' only options were to spend their second free day at the Fair on Saturday or attend its opening ceremony late on our last day of courses and excursions. Our students unanimously and eagerly agreed to attend the evening ceremony; having been immersed in the "One Day in the City" celebration during the previous week, students wanted to be involved in one neighborhood's efforts to reclaim and reinvigorate a tradition for which it had once been both famous and infamous. So, despite thorough research and planning, we had to remain flexible enough to look out for and then incorporate serendipitous opportunities for student involvement, and to find creative ways to work these important and exuberant additions into our course materials and program goals.

“Free Days”: Individual Responsibility and Cross-cultural Confidence

Before we left for London, most of our students planned to spend one or both of their free days visiting combinations of the following attractions: the London Eye, the *Harry Potter* studio, and the Tower of London. During our pre-departure meeting and on our program blog, my colleagues and I began encouraging students to consider more adventurous uses of these open days. We suggested that they begin to plan days in advance, to investigate train, bus, and even boat schedules, and to think about places outside the city that they could explore and compare to what they were learning about London. This encouragement, coupled with their experiences finding their own ways through the city to our daily excursions during the first week of the program, led to some bolder choices—a train journey to Bath to visit locations frequented by Jane Austen, a day-long tour of the Wimbledon grounds, a search for the recently unearthed Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch, and a day spent hours away in Sherwood Forest and the village of Edwinstowe, among others. Even local adventures took on greater importance, as one pair discovered a book signing by one of their favorite graphic artists at a hard-to-find bookstore in Soho and spent several hours in animated conversation with other fans and aficionados of graphic literature. While several students did spend one of their days learning about all-things-*Potter*, most spent their remaining day on one of these more independently conceived and personalized expeditions. From the stories students traded before and after class and in the evenings at neighborhood pubs, it was clear that those who sought out and executed less common adventures earned more than the satisfaction of visiting a popular attraction: these students gained noticeable confidence in their abilities to research, navigate, and share with colleagues what they found most intriguing and stimulating about the country and the culture in which they were living and studying.

After the Airport: Integrating Cross-Cultural Awareness

Requiring students to complete reflection and research papers after they return from a short-term study abroad program is one way to extend the stay and keep students processing what they have experienced using the cross-cultural frameworks initiated pre-departure and developed throughout their time abroad. For Literary London, we encouraged students to integrate specific observations and experiences into these final assignments. For example, I asked each student to draft a contemporary “sketch” of a location, event, or person based on those Dickens writes in *Sketches by Boz*, accompanied by an author memorandum that explained how the contemporary sketch incorporates stylistic and rhetorical elements of Dickens’s works. Students were also assigned a more formal research paper centered around the city in one of Dickens’s novels, and even there, references to excursions and student experiences in London both advanced students’ arguments and helped integrate their memories into their growth as critical thinkers and global citizens.

Maintaining the blog with pictures and shared reflections also helped keep students' experiences open-ended, as did creating a social media page that allowed program participants to invite their friends to join in students' reflective dialogues. While many students may post to their individual pages, a program page can both broaden the conversation and begin promoting the program for the next year. Our Study Abroad Office, run by Mary Sasso, capitalizes on student eagerness to share their experiences by seeking recruits to speak at international study events in the early fall. Some programs establish study abroad "ambassadors" (Donnelly-Smith, 2009, p. 15) who discuss their experiences with prospective study abroad participants as well as prospective students at university open houses and accepted-student fairs. For all of these endeavors, program leaders and study abroad coordinators can meet with and encourage program participants to discuss not only the sites they have visited but the ways in which their thinking about our own culture and that of the host country has changed as a result of their experiences abroad. To hear students talk about ways in which they encounter and value difference, for example, is but one dramatic way that students enrich all of us on campus through a heightened awareness of cross-cultural exchange.

Our efforts to assess the program since its first run in 2006 show that most students have incorporated their approaches to and understanding of another culture into their academic and personal lives. In the short term, students' responses to course evaluations list various specific excursions as "meaningful" and "memorable," and about half of those responding elaborated some personal connection to a place or an event. Just over one-third of the respondents said specifically and without a leading prompt that the program changed the ways they view their own and other cultures. More telling, however, is the nearly unanimous eagerness of students (even graduating seniors) to discuss and promote the program to their colleagues. I have observed students describing the program at study abroad fairs and in brief presentations in English classes and have been impressed by the way all of them speak not only to the fun they have had but also to the ways in which their experiences have made them more aware of the ways we all construct and participate in cultural and national identities. For example, one student shared that after her fortnight in London, she is more aware of the ways in which Canadian culture (our campus is less than an hour's drive from a border crossing) is a hybrid of English and American traditions but yet has its own, distinctive aspects. "Living in another country is like learning another language," she explained. "You not only learn another way of living, but it's the best way to teach you about your own country, too."

On a broader scale, I am aware of three students who have traveled abroad on their own since their participation in the program; another has applied for a Master's program at King's College in London, and a fifth has enrolled in a Master's program in northern England. We are in the process of developing a Literary London alumni group via Facebook and the program's blog, partly to

extend our assessment and partly to offer students an opportunity to connect with participants in other years.

When they are thoughtfully planned and executed, short-term study abroad programs can achieve many of the outcomes that semester and full-year programs accomplish while assuaging many of the concerns common to students attending SCUs. These six features are among many that can effectively extend a more affordable and practical two-week program abroad into months of self-reflection and cultural awareness that often redefine how students view their careers at college and beyond. Short-term programs also have great potential as marketing tools to promote one's institution as a global campus community that encourages its students to expand their worldviews as well as their perspectives on their own cultures. In this decade when liberal arts education and the value of SCUs have come increasingly under scrutiny, well-designed short-term study abroad programs produce some of the most vocal champions of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary learning in the students who have participated in them. Expanding the conversation among study abroad program leaders at SCUs can only amplify these voices and further strengthen the commitment of SCUs to preparing students to more fully appreciate personal and cultural connections and differences they experience both locally and globally.

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